
Reconsiderations

THE OPINION OF THE CAMBRIDGE
ASSOCIATION, 1 AUGUST 1692:
A NEGLECTED TEXT OF THE
SALEM WITCH TRIALS
CLIVE HOLMES

ON 28 June 1692, eighteen-year-old Susannah Sheldon testified to the Grand Jury in the second session of the court sitting at Salem to try accused witches that she had been frequently attacked by Sarah Good during the previous month: she had been bitten, pinched, and choked. On several occasions, Good had tied her hands so tightly that neighbours had been obliged to cut the string to free her; three neighbors also testified to this and confirmed that Sheldon had been writhing in pain as a consequence of the assaults. Although Good was chained in Boston goal since 9 March, Sheldon claimed that “I have ben most greviously tortured by the Apperishtion of Sarah Good who has most dreadfully afflected me.”¹ This was an example of the spectral evidence that came before the Salem court. The probative status of such testimony posed a most serious issue to the judges and to the ministers who uneasily watched the progress of the witch trials.

On 1 August 1692, at a meeting at Harvard presided over by Increase Mather and including Samuel Willard, eight ministers unanimously subscribed to a statement that discussed the use of spectral evidence in the witchcraft trials. The ministers agreed that while Satan might mislead those afflicted by witchcraft and encourage them

The argument of this paper was initially advanced at a celebration of the scholarship and teaching of my old colleague, Marybeth Norton, in the fall of 2012. I am grateful to Marybeth and to Bernard Rosenthal, the commentator on that occasion, for their helpful comments on the paper. Since then Emerson Baker, David Hall, and Dan Howe have given me both assistance in refining the argument and encouragement to publish it.

¹*Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, ed. Bernard Rosenthal (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), nos. 333, 338, 841.

to accuse innocent people as their tormentors, his ability to do this depended upon God's permission and the serving of his purposes and was nullified once the accusation had been brought before an official tribunal. This 1 August Opinion, I argue, provided direct encouragement to the court sitting at Salem to use spectral evidence as probative of witchcraft. Yet the Opinion has been neglected in recent scholarship because it does not fit easily with the current historiography, which tends to minimise the proactive role of the ministers (with the exception of those from Salem and directly involved in the accusations, like Samuel Parris and Nicholas Noyes). I argue further that the Opinion, which sanctioned and encouraged the procedures of the court, must be understood in the context of the developing accusations against the former Salem Village minister, George Burroughs. Burroughs, so unlike the usual suspects in witchcraft cases, was an irresistible target for the Mathers, both Increase and his son Cotton, who were deeply engaged in the British debates on the possibility of diabolic witchcraft. It enabled them to refute those sceptics who derided the feeble performances and low status—largely poor old women—of those seduced by Satan to join his cohorts. Finally I seek to show why the position taken in the Opinion was abandoned by its proponents by the fall of 1692. The conviction of Burroughs and the court's continued endeavours to hunt down witches empowered the accusers, although themselves marginal, to target members of the elite and, in doing so, to fracture the social order.

On 27 June 1692 some of the ministers who joined in the Cambridge Association held their regular monthly meeting in Harvard's library. On these occasions they discussed matters of clerical concern: the "circumstances of the church abroad" was the theme on the 27th. They then agreed that at the next meeting, on 1 August, for which they appointed Increase Mather moderator, they would address an issue closer to home:

Whether ye Divels may not sometimes have a permission to Represent an Innocent Person as Tormenting such as are under Diabolical Molestacōns?

The minutes of the 1 August meeting, written in the hand of the moderator, report the presence of eight ministers, including Samuel Willard, and that

All did agree to ye Affirmative of ye Question pposed viz
That ye devills may sometimes have a pmision to Represent an iȝnocent person, as tormenting such as are under diabolical molestations. But yt such

things are rare & extraordinary especially when such matters come before civil judicature.²

By 1 August, the issue had become one of some urgency.³ The court at Salem had been nominated by the new governor, Sir William Phips, on 27 May; its president was William Stoughton, deputy governor of the colony, and, many years before a Fellow of New College, Oxford and a parish minister in Sussex. The court had held two sessions already and had condemned six women to death. The second of August was the date for its third session when six more of the accused were to be tried, four of them men, including the minister George Burroughs. In this context the Association's determination was a prosecutor's charter: "civil judicature" was, the ministers affirmed, largely protected from Satanic legerdemain. Yet, despite its powerful validation of the actions of the court, the 1 August Opinion is the neglected document of the Salem witch trials.

We may note immediately that it is not neglected because it is difficult to access. The 1 August Declaration was printed in two publications later in the fall of 1692. It appeared first in mid-October in Cotton Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World* where it is described as the work of a "meeting of some very Pious and Learned Ministers among us" (Cotton Mather was not present on that day).⁴ Five weeks later it was printed again in Increase Mather's *Cases of Conscience concerning Evil Spirits Personating Men*.⁵ The arguments of this latter tract had been presented orally by Increase Mather to the Cambridge Association at its 3 October meeting.

The 1 August statement and the meeting from which it originated has been strangely omitted in studies of Salem undertaken in the last

²Minute Book of the Cambridge Association, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, pp. 49–50: I am very grateful to the archivists of the Society for making copies of this document for me.

³Stacy Schiff, *The Witches: Salem, 1692* (New York: Little, Brown, 2015), p. 255.

⁴Cotton Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World*. First published in Boston by Benjamin Harris, it was dated 1693, but was available in mid-October 1692; the second edition, published by John Dunton is dated London, 1693. Extracts from the book have been published in *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, ed. George Lincoln Burr (New York: Scribner, 1914): in notes to this article, where possible I have used Burr's edition. Where, as in the passage quoted, the text is not reproduced in Burr's edition, I have used Dunton's London edition: its pagination is a mess, but less complex than that of that of the first, Boston, edition. The quotation in the text is, using the Dunton edition, 1st pagination, p. 9.

⁵Increase Mather, *Cases of Conscience concerning Evil Spirits Personating Men* (Boston: Benjamin Harris, 1693 recte 1692), p. 32.

twenty-five years. Mary Beth Norton does not mention it at all; neither does Peter Charles Hoffer in either of his books, nor Emerson Baker.⁶ Most extraordinarily, given his book is entitled *Satan and Salem*, it goes unmentioned by Benjamin Ray.⁷ Bernard Rosenthal glances at the text but treats it only in a footnote to a discussion of Increase Mather's *Cases of Conscience*.⁸ Only Stacy Schiff sees something of the significance of the statement, but does not contextualise it fully.⁹ Why the silence? Because the Cambridge Association's statement does not fit with the current trend in Salem historiography.

The statement fails to mortise with the emphases preferred by modern historians both specifically and generally. Those who wish to demonize Cotton Mather's role at Salem can take little from it, as he was not present at the meeting, though, as we have seen, he subsequently cited the declaration enthusiastically. It is not helpful to those scholars who seek to portray Increase as an undeviating voice of moderation and reason.¹⁰ Nor is it analysed carefully—indeed it is often not even mentioned—by those who argue that Samuel Willard, “one of the real heroes of the proceedings,” was “opposed to the Salem witch hunt from beginning to end” and who lionise his role in the termination of the prosecutions.¹¹ More generally, the

⁶Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Knopf, Borzoi books, 2002); Emerson W. Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft: The Salem Trials and the American Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Salem Witchcraft Trials: A Legal History* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1997); *The Devil's Disciples: Makers of the Salem Witchcraft Trials* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

⁷Benjamin C. Ray, *Satan and Salem: The Witch-Hunt Crisis of 1692* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

⁸Bernard Rosenthal, *Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 136, 137, 247n23.

⁹Schiff, *The Witches*, pp. 223, 255–56.

¹⁰Kenneth Ballard Murdoch, *Increase Mather: The Foremost American Puritan* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1925) has nothing on the 1 August meeting. Michael G. Hall, *The Last American Puritan: The Life of Increase Mather* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), p. 261, notes the 1 August meeting only as the occasion on which the ministers invited Increase Mather to compose a full statement on the proper rules of evidence, a suggestion, first mooted by Thomas Holmes and followed by others, for which there is absolutely no warrant in the texts: Thomas J. Holmes, *Increase Mather: A Bibliography of His Works* (Cleveland: privately printed, 1931), p. 118.

¹¹The quotations are from Baker, *Storm of Witchcraft*, p. 196 and from David C. Brown, “The Salem Witchcraft Trials: Samuel Willard's Some Miscellany Observations,” *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 122 (1986): 207: and see also 208, 211 (hereafter referred to as *EIHC*): Brown fails to mention the Cambridge declaration. So too does Mark A. Peterson, “‘Ordinary’ Preaching and the Interpretation of the Salem Witchcraft Case by the Boston Clergy,” *EIHC*, 129 (1993): 84–100. Stephen L. Robbins,

1 August statement does not fit with the commonly accepted chronology of the ministerial response to the issues of evidence. The key texts which are commonly cited are used to suggest a sense of growing disquiet among the ministerial elite concerning the proceedings at Salem which culminates in the 3 October *Cases of Conscience*.

On 31 May, four days after Phips commissioned the court and three days before its opening session and the conviction of Bridget Bishop, Cotton Mather wrote private letters to some of the judges.¹² In his lengthy discussion of the vexed issue of the proof of witchcraft in the absence of a confession, Cotton first tackled the question of spectral evidence. Victims claimed that they were tormented by the spectres of the witches, visible only to them, who sought to seduce them to the dark side and tormented them when they refused to be recruited. Cotton sought to persuade his correspondents that “you do not lay more stress upon pure specter testimony than it will bear.” “It is very certain,” he continued, “that the devils have sometimes represented the shapes of persons not only innocent, but also very virtuous.” He immediately weakened the force of his warning by adding that “I believe that the just God then ordinarily provides a way for the speedy vindication of the persons thus abused.”¹³

In mid-June, as the gaols were filled with more suspects, and doubts were publically aired about the magistrates’ reliance “upon bare spectre testimonie,” the governor and council officially sought the collective advice of the colony’s ministers on the Salem investigations.¹⁴ Phips received their reply, a document consisting of eight articles known as “the Ministers’ Return” and written by Cotton Mather on 15 June. In the work in which Mather coyly acknowledged his authorship,

“Samuel Willard and the Spectres of God’s Wrathful Lion,” *New England Quarterly* 60 (December 1987): 596-603, discusses the declaration, but muddles the dating of the key document and so fails to understand its significance. Hoffer, *The Devil’s Disciples*, p. 181, mentions the meeting of the association, but not the declaration, and suggests that Willard was not present at the meeting.

¹²Only a copy of his letter to one of the judges, John Richards, has survived—see *Selected Letters of Cotton Mather*, ed. Kenneth Silverman (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), pp. 35-40. But in his “Reserved Memorials” Cotton wrote in the plural of “Letters to the Judges,” *The Diary of Cotton Mather*, ed. W. C. Ford, Massachusetts Historical Society, *Collections*, 7th ser., vols. 7, 8 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1911-12) 7:150.

¹³*Selected Letters*, ed. Silverman, p. 36. It must be acknowledged that Mather may have revised this letter after the date on which he claims it was sent.

¹⁴The petition of the Baptist preacher, William Milborne and others, led to Milborne’s summons before the council on 25 June: but, as Burr suggests, the petition may have circulated earlier, and “was very possibly the reason for the consultation of the clergy.” *Narratives*, ed. Burr, p. 196n3.

his 1697 *Life* of Governor Phips, he transcribed only five.¹⁵ The third and fourth articles stressed the “need of a very critical and exquisite caution,” and of “exceeding Tenderness towards those . . . complained of, especially if they have been persons formerly of an unblemished reputation”; the fifth and sixth, questioned trial procedures, the court’s over-reliance on spectral evidence and other tests that also might involve “the Devil’s Legerdemains,” and finally the seventh, hinted that if less credence was given to the claims of the afflicted, the devils who inspired them might be less active. Cotton’s editorial scissors cut the first and second articles, which acknowledged the assaults of the Invisible World, and thanked the magistrates for the “success” of their “Sedulous and Assiduous Endeavours.” The eighth article, also cut by Cotton, recommended the “speedy and vigorous Prosecution” of the accused.¹⁶ On 19 June, Samuel Willard developed a message similar to that set out in Cotton Mather’s central articles as part of a sequence of sermons on the First Epistle of Peter 5:8 preached in Old South Church.¹⁷ Willard insisted that the devil could represent an innocent person, but only upon “an extriordinary dispensation” of God. He continued that this “is not Inconsistent wth ye justice of god in governing ye [world] . . . there are things as darke & as unaccountable as this has befallne ye peo[ple] of god . . . yet god is just & ritious still.”¹⁸

So, by mid-June, the ministerial elite of the colony had come to question the deployment of spectral evidence as proof of diabolic witchcraft. They did so, however, with some ambiguity and, in the case of Cotton Mather’s pronouncements, more than a measure of equivocation. In October, when the ministers heard Increase Mather’s *Cases of Conscience* and agreed to its publication with a powerful preface penned by Willard that affirmed their “Consent to, and Concurrence with” its arguments, clerical hostility to the employment of spectral evidence was fundamentally asserted. After the October

¹⁵Cotton Mather, *Pietas in Patriam: the Life of his Excellency, Sir William Phips* (London: Sam. Bridge for Nath. Hiller, 1697), pp. 77–78. Mather repeated his editorial excision in his 1702 *Magnalia Christi Americana* (London: Thomas Parkhurst), book 2, p. 63.

¹⁶The full version was first published in Increase Mather’s *Cases of Conscience*, postscript, unpag. David Levin provides an excellent analysis of the document. “Did the Mathers Disagree about the Salem Witchcraft Trials?” American Antiquarian Society, *Proceedings*, n.s., 95 (January 1985): 21–22.

¹⁷“Be sober; be vigilant: for your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.”

¹⁸The quotations are from Edward Bromfield’s contemporary sermon notes, as reported in Peterson, “‘Ordinary’ Preaching and the Salem Witchcraft Case,” pp. 98–99.

meeting, Increase appended a statement to the printed version of his text designed to paper over differences with his son and to justify the execution of George Burroughs. Increase attempted to soften the suggestion of any criticism of the Salem judges, hence the awkward embedding of the text of the 1 August Opinion in *Cases* and some tendentious passages of argument.¹⁹ But his learned demonstration from scripture, the fathers, and more recent examples that God with his unconstrained sovereignty had often permitted Satan to create a spectre of an innocent man is far more destructive of the use of spectral evidence than the permissive 1 August pronouncement.²⁰

It is tempting to assert a linear development of the attitudes of the clerical elite toward a hardening of their opposition to the employment of spectral evidence from the mid-June "Return" to the October *Cases of Conscience*.²¹ What then are we to make of the 1 August pronouncement, with its permissive language, with its insistence that judicial process could not be subverted by satanic delusion? The conclusion affirmed by the Cambridge Association is less qualified, less cautious than the opinions offered by Willard in his sermons, by the ministers to the governor on 15 June, or that which Cotton Mather sent to the newly appointed judges on 31 May.

The last serious attempt to engage with the association's statement was Chadwick Hansen's in 1969. He insisted, correctly I believe, that the equivocal statement "represented a major change in position for the clergy. They were backing down." Hansen argues that the text was intended as a reply to the letter of 23 July directed to a number of the ministers from John Proctor and other prisoners begging them to approach Governor Phips to provide less prejudiced judges and jurors than they faced in Salem and to move the trials to Boston. The ministers, reluctant to open a breach between themselves and the magistrates, "squirmed" but chose to validate the actions of the court.²² But this account is undercut by his reliance on Increase's printed version. The manuscript account would have provided a fuller

¹⁹His statement "so that perhaps there never was an Instance of any Innocent Person Condemned in any Court of Judicature on Earth, only through Satans deluding and imposing on the Imaginations of men." (Mather, *Cases of Conscience*, p. 21) is particularly gnomic.

²⁰Mather, *Cases of Conscience*, pp. 1-34.

²¹As does David Levin, who leaps immediately from the Ministers' Return of 15 June to Increase's *Cases of Conscience*, and finds no disagreement between these documents. "Did the Mathers Disagree about the Salem Witchcraft Trials?" p. 29.

²²Chadwick Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem* (New York: Braziller, 1969), pp. 135-37. Hansen's suggestion of the importance of Proctor's petition has been accepted by other scholars; see Larry Gragg, *A Quest for Security* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990),

sense of the context and chronology of the document's creation: the Cambridge Association had determined to discuss the issue on 27 June, long before Proctor's petition.

In theological developments before and after the permissive 1 August statement, the ministers were not, at least in their public pronouncements, interested in the mechanics of the appearance of spectres or the operation of witchcraft through touch, though Brattle's sardonic reference to "the Salem philosophy," with its invocation of "the doctrine of *effluvia*," indicates a broader, but unofficial, discussion.²³ The ministers concentrated their arguments on the issue of agency, on the respective roles of the witch, Satan, and God in cases of witchcraft. William Perkins, with his usual clarity, had provided a concise statement of the intrinsic nature of witchcraft: "Witchcraft is a wicked Arte, serving for the working of wonders, by the assistance of the Devill, so farre forth as God shall in iustice permit."²⁴ But this raises a profound question: what might not God, in his sure but inscrutable justice, allow or encourage Satan to attempt?

The issues here are nicely caught in the description of two altercations in the preliminary examination of Captain John Alden on 31 May, as reported by Alden to Robert Calef, Cotton Mather's bitter adversary.²⁵ Alden's old acquaintance and shipmate, Bartholomew Gedney, one of the examining magistrates, said that he had "always . . . look'd upon him to be an honest Man," but now, witnessing the horrible torments that the accusers experienced as Alden looked on them, "he did see cause to alter his judgment." Alden asked, pertinently enough, "why Aldin's looking upon *him* (Gedney) did not strike *him* down as well." Alden was then told to touch the accusers, and, at his touch, they recovered. Alden continues that he "began to

p. 143; Marilynne Roach, *The Salem Witch Trials* (New York: Cooper Square, 2002), pp. 211, 219.

²³Brattle, "Letter of Thomas Brattle, F.R.S., 1692" in *Narratives*, ed. Burr, pp. 171-72. Sarah Rivett, *The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2011): chapter 5 provides a full and compelling account of the intersection of science, philosophy, and theology in contemporary understandings of witchcraft.

²⁴William Perkins, *A discourse of the damned art of witchcraft* (Cambridge: Cantrel Legge, 1608), pp. 3-4.

²⁵Robert Calef, *More Wonders of the Invisible World* (London: Nath. Hiller and Joseph Collyer, 1700) transcribed in *Narratives*, ed. Burr, p. 354; as with Cotton Mather's *Wonders*, I have used Burr's transcription of Calef whenever possible. Alden's clash with Gedney is confirmed by the contemporary (October 1692) account by Thomas Brattle: "Letter" in *Narratives*, ed. Burr, pp. 170-71.

speak of the Providence of God in suffering these creatures to accuse Innocent persons." This provoked a tirade from the Salem town minister, Nicholas Noyes, who never abandoned his belief in the justice and integrity of the trials. How dared Alden speak of divine providence: "God by his Providence . . . governs the World and keeps it in peace." Two related issues stem from this: were the judges in witch trials inviolable? Would God allow the subversion of judicial process?

These were key questions which had been addressed since the sixteenth century by both Catholic and Protestant demonologists. The former gave unequivocal answers.²⁶ Magistrates were protected in the conduct of their offices partly by virtue of their divinely sanctioned role and partly by their ability to employ protective rituals devised by the Church. Nor would God permit Satan to destroy society by subverting the basic procedures of justice. Only Martin Del Rio was prepared to acknowledge that God might permit satanic delusion to confuse proper investigation, and Increase Mather was to praise him in *Cases* for his argument: "it is rare to see such words dropping from the Pen of a Jesuit."²⁷ Protestant demonologists were more divided in their judgments. James VI of Scotland, future James I of England, argued that judicial process and personnel were immune: "where God begins justly to strike by his lawful lieutenants it is not in the devil's power to defraud or bereave him of the office or effect of his powerful and revenging sceptre." His line was followed by the derivative Thomas Cooper in 1617.²⁸ But, as Mather reported in *Cases*, most Protestants, British and continental, were reluctant to place limits on the absolute sovereignty of an inscrutable and omnipotent God. Judges and judicial procedure were not invariably invulnerable. Gedney could not be guaranteed immunity from a witch's evil eye; Nicholas Noyes was wrong in his assumption of divine respect for social and legal order. Nor, we might add, could the Salem Court's shackling of accused witches, including a five-year-old child, prevent Satan from continuing to assail their targets.²⁹

²⁶Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 571-81 provides a fine introduction to the issue of inviolability.

²⁷Mather, *Cases of Conscience*, p. 30.

²⁸James VI, *Demonology* (Edinburgh, 1597), reprinted as document 28, in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, eds. Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2000); the quotation is from p. 399; Thomas Cooper, *The Mystery of Witchcraft* (London: Nicholas Okes, 1617), p. 248.

²⁹The chaining of suspects, which was not limited to those who had refused to confess, as argued by Benjamin Ray in *Satan and Salem* (p. 101), deserves more

Why was an argument, apparently justifying the acceptance of spectral evidence by the Salem Court, agreed to by the eight ministers, including Increase Mather and Samuel Willard, on 1 August? It turns on the identity of one of the four men to face trial at Salem in the next few days, the minister George Burroughs. In mid-June the ministerial elite of the colony had questioned, guardedly, the deployment of spectral evidence as proof of diabolic witchcraft. In the course of the next six weeks several of them, including the Mathers, appear to have abandoned this hesitant scepticism for a more robust affirmation of their other theme, the need for judicial activism, a process that culminated in the 1 August statement. They did so as the case against Burroughs developed.

The charges against George Burroughs, first emerging in late April 1692, were always treated with exceptional attention by the authorities. His arrest was ordered by the governing Council of Massachusetts before a formal charge was levelled against him.³⁰ His first interrogation, on 9 May, was conducted by the Salem JPs reinforced by two councillors from Boston, William Stoughton and Samuel Sewall, and initially dealt with his religious convictions—his failure to attend communion or to baptise his children. The seriousness of the charges against him swiftly escalated after his arrest, interrogation, and imprisonment. In the earliest testimony against Burroughs, the afflicted told a fairly straightforward, if deeply troubling, story.³¹ Burroughs had approached them in spectral form, pressed them to sign the devil's book, and, when they had refused, tormented them horribly. Some had also seen the ghosts of Burroughs's first two wives who declared that he had murdered them. But after Burroughs had been interrogated and imprisoned, the "embellishments of the stories grew," as the afflicted, supported by the growing number of confessors, began to flesh out a yet deeper and darker tale.³² In early June

discussion than it usually receives. Its justification appears to be simply pragmatic: it was thought to protect the afflicted. But it did not invariably do so. The child, Dorothy Good, was chained though she had confessed; her mother's curses still harmed though she had been chained.

³⁰The formal complaint to the JPs was made on 30 April. On that day Major Hutchinson, at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, instructed the provost-marshall for Maine to arrest Burroughs, citing a "perticular order" from the Governor and Council of Massachusetts (*Records*, ed. Rosenthal, nos. 96, 97, 115). This chronology does not support the suggestion (Ray, *Satan and Salem*, p. 138) that the order from Boston came after the complaint.

³¹*Records*, ed. Rosenthal, nos. 120, 457.

³²Rosenthal, *Salem Story*, p. 134.

it was alleged that Burroughs, sounding a trumpet, had summoned a group of accused witches to attend a blasphemous parody of communion with sweet bread and wine—in fact, blood—in a field near Parris's house.³³ By mid-July, as a group of accused witches from Andover sought refuge in confession, the number in Burroughs's coven grew from twenty or so to hundreds, and the focus on his eschatological role was enhanced. He was recognised as the celebrant at the perverted communion rituals, first witnessed by the afflicted girls in mid-April, and these occasions were described in ever greater and more precise detail.³⁴ It was also alleged that he presided over diabolic baptismal rites, where initiates renounced the Christian sacrament.³⁵ Burroughs, it was said, had been promised the office of king of Hell, and the devil's intentions in deploying the renegade minister and his coven became ever more ambitious: "to set up the Diuills Kingdome"; "throwing Dwone the Kingdome of Christ & Setting up the Diuel on his throwne."³⁶

It is very likely that Cotton Mather, who made a number of journeys to Salem, attended the key interrogations of the Andover confessors on the 22 July.³⁷ And he and others of the ministerial elite responded vigorously as the new evidence filled out the role of Burroughs in ever darker colors. Cotton Mather began a 5 August letter to his uncle, the minister John Cotton, with a triumphant ejaculation: "Our good God is working of miracles." The five women executed on 19 July had gone to their deaths begging for a divine "vindication of their innocence"; God's response had been the "most ample, surprising, amazing confessions" of those from Andover, who named those executed as their coadjutors, and agreed in nominating Burroughs as their ringleader. All this Cotton Mather saw as miraculous answers to his prayers.³⁸ The previous day he had preached at a Fast Day; in his sermon, he repeated the charges of the Andover confessors *verbatim*.

³³Records, ed. Rosenthal, nos. 255, 458.

³⁴Ray, *Satan and Salem*, pp. 91, 98-99, 135.

³⁵Rosenthal, *Salem Story*, pp. 132-34.

³⁶Records, ed. Rosenthal, nos. 419, 428.

³⁷In his sermon on 4 August, Mather reported the confessions of children seduced into witchcraft by their parents. This must refer to the testimony of Martha Lacey, Jr. on 22 July against her mother and grandmother: *Diary of Cotton Mather*, ed. Ford, 1:151; Mather, *Wonders*, 2nd pagination, p. 51. See also Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York: Harper Row, 1984), pp. 105-6 for the influence of the Andover depositions on Cotton Mather.

³⁸Selected Letters, ed. Silverman, pp. 40-41.

The witches met in “Hellish Randevouzes,” where they participated in diabolical sacraments imitating communion and baptism: their purposes were “no less a thing than *To destroy the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ in these parts of the World.*”³⁹

The Cambridge 1 August declaration was formulated in the heightened atmosphere of eschatological challenge. Its loose attitude towards proof was designed to ensure the destruction of Burroughs, the case against whom relied entirely on the tainted spectral evidence.⁴⁰ Why was there a determination to destroy Burroughs?

Two recent commentators on Salem in 1692 have emphasised the central importance of the trial and execution of Burroughs in that history. For Bernard Rosenthal, the destruction of Burroughs is the central episode at Salem; Mary Beth Norton thinks Burroughs “the key figure in the entire affair.”⁴¹ Norton and Rosenthal disagree, however, about the motives of those who hounded Burroughs to his death. For Rosenthal, he was sacrificed for objectionable theological conduct, specifically those of his practices that suggested Baptist convictions. For Norton, Burroughs, who had returned to Maine after abandoning his ministry at Salem Village in 1683, was open to accusations that his behaviour suggested a diabolic alliance with the Wabanakis and their French allies who wrought such terrible damage to frontier settlements.⁴² I suggest another view of the exceptional significance of the Burroughs affair—a view not incompatible with either or both of those just summarized. Burroughs provided an irresistible opportunity for those in New England who were engaged in the transatlantic debate on the reality of witchcraft.⁴³ Their theoretical

³⁹Mather, *Wonders*, 2nd pagination, pp. 2–53, specifically p. 41.

⁴⁰Increase Mather claimed in the postscript to *Cases of Conscience*, that he was persuaded by the legally irrelevant hearsay evidence of Burroughs’s unusual strength, evidence that was supplemented and massaged after his conviction (see *Records*, ed. Rosenthal, nos. 634, 635 and the notes by the editor). The Rev. John Hale more honestly recognised the centrality of the spectral evidence; John Hale, *A Modest Inquiry* (Boston: B. Green and J. Allen for Benjamin Eliot, 1702), in *Narratives*, ed. Burr, p. 421.

⁴¹Rosenthal, *Salem Story*, p. 129; Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare*, p. 120.

⁴²Rosenthal, *Salem Story*, pp. 130–32; and Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare*, pp. 119–32.

⁴³A number of scholars have recently insisted that the Salem trials have a British context: Michael Winship argues that the Mathers were “not caught in provincial isolation”; Sarah Rivett, that the trials are not examples of “American exceptionalism.” Winship, *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and early Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), chaps. 6 and 7 (quotation, p. 112); and Rivett, “Our Salem, Our Selves,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser.,

arguments were powerfully reinforced by the opportunity to nominate a man, a cleric, as a witch.⁴⁴

From the second half of the sixteenth century, the defenders, both Catholic and Protestant, of the orthodox assertion that witches were empowered as a consequence of their entering a covenant with Satan, were keenly aware that they had to refute the arguments of those who denied that such an agreement could be made. The first wholly English treatise that challenged the orthodox account of witchcraft was Reginald Scot's powerfully sceptical *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584). Scot's arguments were subsequently deployed by other non-believers, notably the future bishop, Samuel Harsnett, in 1603.⁴⁵ After the Civil War and the re-printing of Scot's work in 1651 (two editions), 1654 and 1665, these arguments were repeated with growing intensity—by Thomas Ady (1655, 1656, 1661), John Wagstaff (1669, 1671), the anonymous (possibly New England) author of *The Doctrine of Devils* (1676), and by John Webster (1677).⁴⁶

All the early British writers who affirmed the reality of diabolic witchcraft, most influentially William Perkins and James VI, denounced Scot. For Perkins's editor, he was “the Adversarie,” “the gainesayer”; James VI excoriated his “damnable opinions” and associated his argument with the “old error of the Sadducees,” an identification that was to have a long run.⁴⁷ Early commentators objected

65, no. 3 (2008): 495–502; Rivett's 2011 *The Science of the Soul* reinforces and deepens her point.

⁴⁴A suggestion hinted at in the first major study of Salem, by Charles W. Upham in 1867: see the reprint of his *Salem Witchcraft* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2000), p. 416. See also Richard Weisman, *Witchcraft, Magic and Religion in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), p. 138.

⁴⁵For Harsnett, see Clive Holmes “Witchcraft and Possession at the Accession of James I,” in *Witchcraft and the Act of 1601*, eds. John Newton and Jo Bath (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 69–90.

⁴⁶Thomas Ady, *A candle in the dark* (London: all Robert Ibbetson, 1655, 1656, 1661). The last edition has a different title: *A perfect discovery of witches*. John Wagstaffe, *The Question of Witchcraft Debated* (London: both Edward Millington, 1669; fuller 2nd ed., 1671); *The doctrine of devils proved to be the Grand Apostasy of these later times* (London, 1676) (for the possibility of New England authorship, see *Narratives*, ed. Burr, p. 82n1); John Webster, *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* (London: J.M., 1677).

⁴⁷Perkins, *Discourse*, title page; unpag. epistle dedicatory; James VI, *Demonology*, in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, eds. Normand and Roberts, p. 353. The Sadducees were a group among the Jews at the time of Christ. Among their beliefs they denied the immortality of the soul or of the existence of spirits—hence the application of the term to those sceptics who challenged the power of witches.

chiefly to Scot's radical re-reading of the scriptural passages, notably Exodus 22:18 and the account of the witch of Endor in 1 Samuel 28, which provided the foundation for the orthodox interpretation. By the post-Restoration period, contemporary defenders of orthodoxy, while they still lashed out at Scot, had more targets and new fears.⁴⁸ Radical scriptural exegesis was reinforced by Socinian critiques of traditional biblical scholarship; materialist philosophers were questioning orthodox accounts of the world of the spirit. For the defenders of orthodoxy, the attacks of the sceptics, the "Atheists and Sadduces of this Age," the "Sons of the Atheistical Leviathan," the upholders of the "absurd tenets maintained by the Cartesian Philosophers," on the classical theology of witchcraft (and on ghost stories and poltergeists) were the thin end of the wedge.⁴⁹ Joseph Glanvill insisted that witch-devil-angel-Resurrection-immortality "hang together in a Chain of connection" and it is "but a happy chance if he who hath lost one link hold another." Those, he continued, who "are sure there are no Witches nor Apparitions . . . are prepared for the denial of Spirits, a Life to come, and all other Principles of Religion."⁵⁰ The "witchcraftical doctors"—so named by an anonymous sardonic opponent—also recognised that they were not wrestling only with subversive philosophers.⁵¹ "Sadducism is the Fashion," Glanvill complained; as such it is followed by "the looser Gentry and the small pretenders to Philosophy and Wit."⁵² Richard Bovet targeted the "drollery of the scoffers," and the "advocates of Debauchery and Sadducism"; George Sinclair imagined "the drollinge wagge" with "a Glass of good Claret" scoffing at witchcraft as "ridiculous and inconsistent with reason."⁵³ Accordingly, their contentions were based on empirical observation, irrefutable, concrete examples, as they saw them, as much as on

⁴⁸Richard Bovet, in his anonymously published *A narrative of the Demon of Spraiton* (London: Daniel Brown and Thomas Malthus, 1683), p. 1, attacked an evil trinity of sceptics: "your HOBBS's, your SCOTS, your WEBSTERS."

⁴⁹See R. B. (Nathaniel Crouch), *The Kingdom of Darkness* (London: Nath. Crouch, 1689), sig. A2, [Bovet], *A narrative*, p. 1; George Sinclair, *Satan's invisible world discovered* (Edinburgh: John Reid, 1685), dedicatory epistle, unpag.

⁵⁰Joseph Glanvill, *A philosophical endeavour towards the defence of the being of witches and apparitions* (London: James Collins 1666), p. 4, and *Saducismus Triumphantus*, 3rd ed. (London: Roger Tuckyr, 1700), pt. 2, p. 2.

⁵¹*The doctrine of devils*, p. 84: see also p. 157 where the author calls his opponents "witchcraftical legendaries."

⁵²Joseph Glanville, *A blow at Modern Sadducism in some philosophical considerations about Witchcraft* (London: James Collins, 1668), sig. B4, p. 167.

⁵³[Bovet], *Narrative*, title page; pp. 2, 9; Sinclair, *Satan's invisible world*, sig. [A2v].

theological or philosophical argument. They sought “to prove demonic existence through the sensory data of human testimony.”⁵⁴ To that end they listed stories of fairies, ghosts and poltergeists, examples of strange premonitions, and cases of witchcraft, many involving diabolic possession through the intermediate agency of a witch.

These defenders of traditional orthodoxy were in many respects a heterogeneous group. They were most obviously divided on issues of ecclesiology. In the defense of the orthodox position on witchcraft, Church of England clergymen (Glanvill, More, Meric Casaubon) co-operated with non-conformists (Richard Baxter, the pro-Covenanting Scot, Sinclair, and the ferociously anti-Catholic Bovet).⁵⁵ There were also philosophical divisions: the neo-Platonic understanding of the world of the spirit to which More and Glanvill subscribed was not shared by Casaubon or Baxter. But, despite such disagreements, they pursued a common enemy with a common methodology, and they praised each other’s work and repeated each other’s stories.⁵⁶

And into this mixed company, we may enroll two of the major Salem participants, the Puritan ministers, Increase and Cotton Mather. Both the former’s *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (1684) and Cotton’s *Memorable Providences* (1689) were written in part as active contributions to the British debate concerning the theology of witchcraft. Cotton, in particular, presented his “little book” as a “Lackey” to the “more elaborate Essays of those learned men,” those “Great Names”—Baxter, Glanvill, and More.⁵⁷

Increase’s work was printed in Boston, but a separate English edition was available and sold at the book shop of George Calvert in St.

⁵⁴This is Sarah Rivett’s telling phrase describing Glanvill in *The Science of the Soul*, p. 248.

⁵⁵Baxter, Casaubon, Glanvill, More and Sinclair have good biographies in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Richard Bovet is the subject of a recent analysis by Jonathan Barry: *Witchcraft and Demonology in South-West England 1640-1789* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), chap. 4.

⁵⁶Michael Winship (*Seers of God*, pp. 120-21) emphasizes the divisions between Dissenters and Church of England divines concerning cases of possession; such divisions figure largely in Peter Elmer’s recent *Witchcraft, Witch-Hunting, and Politics in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). There are disagreements, but the common enemy, the Sadducee, the radical deist, is always a common target (see Elmer, *Witchcraft*, p. 286n51).

⁵⁷The passage, from the author’s unpaginated introduction, is quoted derisively by Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 180.

Paul's churchyard: it became one of the major source of the stories of the supernatural compiled in Nathaniel Crouch's pot-boiling anthology, *The kingdom of darkness*.⁵⁸ Cotton's work was re-published in London in 1691, with a modified title, *Late Memorable Providences*, and in Edinburgh in 1697; Richard Baxter wrote a preface for the London edition, in which he praised it and Increase's earlier book, for both argument and method: they provide "such full Convincing Evidence, that he must be a very obdurate Sadducee that will not believe it."⁵⁹ Such transatlantic interplay is dense and continuous. The works of the English commentators were available to and closely read by the New Englanders. Increase Mather, who acquired his own copies of the 1661 edition of Ady and of Webster when in London negotiating the new charter for Massachusetts in 1691, assails both those writers and Scot and Wagstaff, while he differentially references the contributions of Glanvill and More.⁶⁰ His son borrows examples from Sinclair and language from Glanvill.⁶¹ Like the British writers, he imagines his activities being derided by "our learned Witlings of the Coffee-House."⁶² Baxter, in his preface, had argued that we should not be surprised by Satan's assault on ultra-godly New England; in his explanation, he used a phrase which struck a chord with Cotton, who re-deployed it during the Salem outbreak: "where will the Devil shew most malice, but where he is hated and hateth most?"⁶³ Baxter, in his 1691 *Certainty of the World*

⁵⁸Crouch's first story (*The kingdom of darkness*, pp. 2-10) and then five others (pp. 24-33), are lifted from Increase Mather's work.

⁵⁹Cotton Mather, *Late Memorable Providences* (London, Thomas Parkhurst, 1691), unpag. Preface by Richard Baxter.

⁶⁰Increase Mather, *An essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (Boston: Samuel Green for Joseph Browning, 1684), pp. 188, 240, 347. Increase Mather's copy of Webster is now in the Houghton Library at Harvard: I owe my knowledge of his copy of Ady to Stacy Schiff and to the work's current owner, Dr Kent Bicknell.

⁶¹Examples: Mather, *Late Memorable Providences*, 3rd pagination (the sermon on 1 Sam. 15:23), p. 18. Language: Mather employs the phrase "That rampant hag" to describe Martha Carrier of Andover; Glanvill had already applied it to Margaret Agar of Brewham in Somerset. Compare Mather, *Wonders*, 3rd pagination, p. 48 with Glanvill, *Saducismus*, pt. 2, p. 85; the phrase is used in the edition of 1682 (London: Thomas Newcomb), the edition owned by Cotton Mather.

⁶²From Robert Calef's printing of Cotton Mather's account of the dispossession of Margaret Rule which circulated in manuscript; see a very similar remark in his manuscript account of the earlier, cognate case of Mercy Short. Both are re-printed, with good editorial comment, in *Narratives*, ed. Burr, pp. 271, 318.

⁶³Mather, *Late Memorable Providences*, unpag. preface by Richard Baxter. This is repeated by Mather in *Wonders*, 1st pagination, p. 5.

of Spirits, acclaimed the work of the Mathers; in return, Cotton sent his post-Salem critic, Robert Calef, a copy of Baxter's "ungainsayable Book."⁶⁴

A fierce debate raged during the post-Restoration period as the diabolic dimension of witchcraft was contested by men wedded to the orthodox formulation and those sceptical of it. The bitter controversy had a transatlantic dimension that involved two of the major ministerial participants in the Salem trials. The arguments raged over a series of refined intellectual fields: Biblical exegesis; ontology; pneumatology; eschatology. But throughout the debate, from Scot onwards, the opponents of orthodox witchcraft belief emphasised the degree to which, for all its theological subtlety and philosophical sophistication, the use of spectral evidence was firmly rooted in popular superstition. The syncretist combination of high theory and popular belief proved to be deeply problematic. The minister, John Gaule, writing during the Civil War, acknowledged that the folkloric deposits, invested with all the absurd credulity of the "ruder conditioned," was "one maine cause" of the infidelity of the sceptics.⁶⁵

The amalgam of folkloric elements and intellectuals' insistence that a covenant with the devil was the essential element of a witch's power was unstable, and it gave the sceptics a series of opportunities to raise the issue of the very peculiar, even self-destructive, behaviour that had to be attributed to Satan in the English and New England records. Why, the sceptics asked, were the devil's activities so underpowered? There are three interrelated dimensions to this critique.⁶⁶

First, popular belief made the witch, and thus the devil, responsible for some trivial, even derisory, interventions. The witch's curse against those who had offended her resulted in failures in the brew house and the dairy, and illness or reproductive failures among beasts.⁶⁷ Such incidents, often recalled from many years past, were fundamental to many of the early prosecutions, and continued to echo through

⁶⁴Richard Baxter, *The Certainty of the World of Spirits* (London: T. Parkhurst and J. Salusbury, 1691), pp. 2, 80; Calef, *More Wonders*, pp. 31, 42-48.

⁶⁵John Gaule, *Select Cases of Conscience Touching Witches and Witchcrafts* (London: W. Wilson, 1646), pp. 7-8.

⁶⁶I consider this issue in more detail in the section "The Devil" of my pamphlet, *Why did the Prosecution of Witches cease in England* (published as an e-book by The Historical Association: London, 2013).

⁶⁷See for example, the accusations against Margaret Grevell of Thorpe, W. W., *A true and just record* (London: Thomas Dawson, 1582), sig. E3.

charges in the second half of the seventeenth century in old and New England.⁶⁸ A second problem was raised by the presence of animal agents (the witch's imp, her familiar) in the trial evidence. In all the early printed reports, of Essex trials from 1566 to 1589, the witch has an animal associated with her power. Demonologists, anticipating the devil, found instead a menagerie of toads, frogs, moles, and ferrets. A third anomaly, again deeply rooted in the folkloric dimension of witch belief, also puzzled the orthodox. Why did the devil recruit his legions from such inferior human material? There are few Fausts in English witchcraft cases: there are many poor old women. "What an unapt instrument is a toothless, old, impotent . . . woman?" Scot jeered, "Truelie the divell little needs such instruments to bring his purposes to passe."⁶⁹ From Scot onwards, sceptics hammered at this point and commented, often sardonically, on these issues of the gender and status of Satan's cohorts which rose to a crescendo after the mid-seventeenth century. So John Wagstaff (1671) argued that the witches of the Bible were the "wise men of this world," but incongruously their modern counterparts were "poor, silly, contemptible people, for instead of such as King Manasses and Queen Jesebel, we now hear talk of this old Gammer and that old Goodwife. It seems the Kingdom of darkness is quite altered in its Politicks, and the Devil is not so wise as some men make him."⁷⁰

Thus challenged, the theorists were obliged to provide apologetic rationalisations for phenomena that made little theological sense, but which "from experience . . . [are] . . . found true."⁷¹ Yet their attempts to explain the anomalies—"these odd performances," "so strange an action"—are tentative and uneasy, and left them open to cutting

⁶⁸For a late Massachusetts account of a witch's attacks on animals and agricultural routines, see John Demos's analysis of the charges against Elizabeth Morse of Newbury in 1680. *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 140, 145-48. David Hall's remark on the 'ordinariness' of accusations captures the situation nicely. Hall, *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Boston, Mass.: Northeastern University Press, 1999), p. 5.

⁶⁹Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London: n.p., 1584), p. 13.

⁷⁰Wagstaffe, *Question of Witchcraft*, 2nd ed., p. 78, and see pp. 83, 95. This language was downloaded wholesale by one of the writers sceptical of the conviction of Jane Wenham in 1712: *The impossibility of Witchcraft*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Baker, 1712), pp. 12-13.

⁷¹Richard Bernard, *A Guide to Grand-jury men* (London: Ed. Blackmore, 1627), p. 91.

rebuttal from the sceptics.⁷² Satan, the orthodox argued, was the prime actor in cases of witchcraft, yet his activities and the purposes they served often seemed incomprehensible. He was complicit in petty acts of maleficium; his or his diabolic minions' appearances in ridiculous animal forms defied the scriptural evocations of the devil as a fiery dragon or a prowling lion. His choice of the agents with whom he covenanted was baffling.

Salem, at its inception, bore many of the marks of popular belief. Traditional ideas of maleficium were present in the early accusations, but, as Cotton Mather acknowledged in reporting the trial of Elizabeth How of Ipswich, these "things in themselves were trivial."⁷³ Animal familiars also emerged in a number of cases. Following a dispute with Bridget Bishop, John Louder was assailed by a black pig and a monkey with the claws of a cock; a yellow bird was alleged to be suckling on Martha Corey in the meeting house during the chaotic 20 March service.⁷⁴ But, as the situation developed, neither the routine charges of stock damage nor familiars played a preponderant role, and the cases were freed from the grosser aspects of the folkloric. The eventual emergence of a witch-minister with a clearly stated diabolic purpose, "throwing Downe the Kingdome of Christ & Setting the Diuel on his throwne," gave the Mathers and their ministerial allies an opportunity to escape the dilemma created by the tension between elite theory and folklore that had embarrassed their anti-Sadducee colleagues. It was an opportunity that they seized, *momentarily*, with enthusiasm.

The confidence, almost euphoria, engendered by the discovery of a vast Satanic conspiracy headed by Burroughs, most obviously inspired Cotton Mather, and continued to do so into fall of 1692. On 17 August, in response to a troubled, possibly critical, inquiry from one of the colony's council, Cotton asserted his complete confidence in the proceedings against the "horrible witchcrafts among us."⁷⁵ He

⁷²The phraseology is from Glanvill's tortuous attempt to explain the purposes of the animal familiars' sucking the blood of the witch. *Philosophical considerations*, pp. 17, 19. Webster's damning criticism is in *Displaying*, p. 81.

⁷³Mather, *Wonders*, 2nd pagination, p. 78. "Matter foreign" in Calef's phrase, who also stresses the antiquity of some of the accusations. Calef, *More Wonders*, p. 110.

⁷⁴Records, ed. Rosenthal, no. 278; Deodat Lawson, *A Brief and True Narrative* (Boston: Benjamin Harris, 1692): this is fully transcribed in *Narratives*, ed. Burr, p. 154.

⁷⁵The letter from John Foster to which Mather was replying has not survived. That it was troubled is suggested by Mather's concluding exhortation to the councillor "that

acknowledged that the “devil may . . . abuse the innocent” in the creation of spectres, yet insisted that the judges had employed this evidence properly, supplementing it with “more human and most convincing testimonies” which themselves were indicative of God’s active concern for justice, “the encouraging presence of God with them.” He hinted that if additional guarantees as to the probity of the court’s deliberations were required, the reinforcement of the trial commission by some ministers, as in Suffolk in 1645, would be appropriate.⁷⁶ Two days later Cotton Mather gave his extraordinary performance at the execution of Burroughs. At the gallows, Burroughs defended his innocence and prayed powerfully, concluding with the Lord’s Prayer. This “drew tears from many (so that it seemed to some that the Spectators would hinder the Execution).” As soon as Burroughs was turned off, Mather, mounted on horseback, defended the justice of the conviction to appease the people, and said that “the Devil was often transformed into an angel of light.”⁷⁷ His total commitment to the witch trials was as apparent in early September, when he praised William Stoughton, the presiding magistrate at Salem, as the divine instrument “for the extinguishing of as wonderful a piece of devilism as has been seen in the world.” He also sought Stoughton’s approval for a treatise that he proposed to publish that would detail some of the trials and provide a discussion “to sanctify the terrible hand of God, which is now upon us,” sending a large section of the proposed work for Stoughton’s inspection.⁷⁸ Confident determination still informs his letter of 20 September seeking trial transcripts from the clerk of the court: objectors against the trials and his project had emerged, but he was still eager to advance “a standard against the infernal enemy” and

whatever you do, you strengthen the hands of our honorable judges in the great work before them.” *Selected Letters*, ed. Silverman, p. 43.

⁷⁶Silverman’s edition of this letter omits the discussion of Suffolk: for that see the fuller transcription in Charles W. Upham, *Salem Witchcraft and Cotton Mather* (Morrisania, 1869), pp. 39-40.

⁷⁷Calef, *More Wonders*, in *Narratives*, ed. Burr, pp. 103-104. See also Brattle’s account: *Brattle Letter*, in *Narratives*, p. 177. Attempts (for example, David Levin, *Cotton Mather: The Young Life of the Lord’s Remembrancer, 1663-1703* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1978], pp. 212-15) by Cotton Mather’s defenders to cast doubt on the central assertions of Calef’s hostile account are unconvincing.

⁷⁸*Selected Letters*, ed. Silverman, pp. 43-44. Silverman’s editing of this letter fails to make it clear how much of the proposed text was already written. For this see the typed transcript of the original letter in the American Antiquarian Society at Worcester. I am very grateful to Kim Toney for making a copy available to me.

to encourage other accounts by the local ministers, Hale and Noyes, who were more intimately engaged in the trial procedures.⁷⁹

The trial and execution of Burroughs was a clear confirmation of the Satanic conspiracy against New England. The devil was not wasting his time. He had secured a potent lieutenant for his forces: a minister, a Faust, had been perverted. Cotton Mather employed the events at Salem in a number of contexts—to prove that the last days were at hand; as a potent metaphor in the jeremiad tradition, emphasising the need for “REFORMATION, REFORMATION”; to attack the popular reliance on charms and on astrology.⁸⁰ Yet at the heart of Cotton Mather’s five trial narratives in *The Wonders of the Invisible World* stood his first example, that of Burroughs.⁸¹ “Glad should I have been, if I had never known the name of this man,” Cotton intoned, but his account of a shattering assault by witchcraft so obviously of Satanic origin, was, I think, originally intended as a major contribution to the transatlantic challenge to “unbelief,” to the arguments of the Sadducees.

Much of the original dynamic, the triumphalism, must be excavated from the published text, because by mid-October when the work was printed, the enthusiasm so apparent in Cotton Mather’s letter offering his services as chronicler of Salem to Stoughton had drained away. Most obviously in the published version of *Wonders*, he was beginning the steady retreat from any statement of personal involvement in, or engagement with, the Salem trials. Mather sought to present himself as a neutral writer, sedulously obeying the instructions of the civil and judicial authorities. So he claimed that Governor Phips had demanded the publication of the work and had insisted that the case of Burroughs be discussed, but this is clearly tendentious in the light of the letter to Stoughton.⁸² Cotton Mather’s diffidence is apparent not only in his uneasy self-fashioning; it also emerges in the “incoherent

⁷⁹Selected Letters, ed. Silverman, pp. 44–45; *The Diary of Samuel Sewall*, ed. M. Halsey Thomas (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 1:297.

⁸⁰These examples are taken from Cotton Mather’s section on the “good and right use of the prodigious descent” of the devil on Massachusetts: *Wonders*, 2nd pagination, pp. 40–53, specifically pp. 47, 48.

⁸¹Not the case of Bridget Bishop, as Sarah Rivett states in *Science of the Soul*, p. 258. Bishop’s trial and execution was the first—but Mather prioritised Burroughs by placing him first.

⁸²His studied attempt to displace responsibility onto the civil authorities was brilliantly diagnosed and savaged by Calef in his comments on the 1697 life of Phips: Calef, *More Wonders*, pp. 152–56.

jumble," the "utter confusion" of *Wonders*.⁸³ The dense, rebarbative and confused argument is particularly apparent in the handling of the issue of spectral evidence in the version of the 4 August sermon provided in *Wonders*. There is a hopeless muddle between Mather's uncritical and enthusiastic account of the employment of spectres by the witches as "Engines of their Malice" and their role in Satan's conspiracy, and the immediately following discussion of the possibility of delusion, of "the most agitated Controversie among us," by false spectres.⁸⁴

The reason for Cotton Mather's shift in perspective and unease by the time of the publication of *Wonders* is apparent in his "extraordinary letter" to his uncle, the minister John Cotton of 20 October, forwarding a copy of the book.⁸⁵ It was written in a mood of bleak depression—"I seem now to have little to do but to die." Mather was tortured by a sense of his isolation in a fractured society. A growing number of "our witch-advocates," hostile to the Salem trials, had turned upon him and his work with "sinful and raging asperity." He believed that the emerging divisions would encourage "the rashest *Mobile*" to challenge the courts and government. The immediate motive of his assailants was the division that had emerged among the Boston ministers, formerly united in the 1 August Opinion, which now pitted Cotton's views against those of his father and most of his intimate clerical colleagues.

On 3 October eight ministers of the Cambridge Association again met at Harvard intending to discuss a pastoral issue, whether the clergy might administer the sacraments to neighbouring congregations temporarily lacking a minister. Cotton Mather had been nominated as the moderator of the meeting. Instead of the anticipated discussion, the assembled ministers heard the first draft of Increase Mather's *Cases of Conscience* and all, except his son, signed a prefatory epistle, drafted by Willard, expressing their wholehearted agreement with Increase's arguments. It was a clear statement that neither spectral evidence, nor the touch test, on which the Salem Court had relied, could be considered immune from Satanic contamination. Six

⁸³Miller, *New England Mind*, p. 202.

⁸⁴Compare Mather, *Wonders*, 2nd pagination, pp. 41-42 with what follows on p. 43. Mather acknowledged (p. 2) that he had added material to the 4 August sermon: this passage seems a clear example of his editing the original text.

⁸⁵*Selected Letters*, ed. Silverman, pp. 45-46. "This extraordinary letter" is Levin's phrase. See his analysis in "Did the Mathers Disagree about the Salem Witchcraft Trials?," pp. 27-28.

of the eight ministers who had approved the more permissive 1 August declaration now reversed their judgment.⁸⁶ Prior to the printing of Increase Mather's book, he had made an attempt to silence those who gloated at the apparent division between father and son, adding a short postscript in which he praised Cotton's book, denied that he intended any criticism of the Salem magistrates, and insisted that had he been one of Burroughs' judges "I could not have acquitted him." It was a painfully unconvincing performance, "a miserable species of double talk,"⁸⁷ and it may have enhanced the clergy's divisions. The postscript was clearly not covered by the ministerial affirmation penned by Willard and ultimately signed by fourteen ministers, and it may have troubled Willard sufficiently to issue his own, far clearer, statement against the reliability of spectral evidence. His work, published anonymously and with misleading information concerning printer and place of publication, was a fictive dialogue between figures representing Boston and Salem.⁸⁸ In the work, "Boston" stressed the inadequacy of current legal works on evidence, argued that the testimony of the accusers was worthless because they were possessed, and insisted that there was absolutely no guarantee that the "Devil cannot represent an Innocent person." Willard, we should note, also emphasised the paradox that while both sides insisted that the fierce arguments and animosities were sinful and threatened serious "Breaches and Divisions among us," both persisted in blaming their opponents for this unhappy situation.⁸⁹

By October, many ministers had reversed their earlier determinations on the use of spectral evidence, and their collective statements had begun to embarrass the previously ardent Cotton Mather. The contorted acrobatics of *Wonders* were a self-serving attempt to

⁸⁶"Minute Book of the Cambridge Association," pp. 50-51; and see the list of signatures provided by Holmes, *Increase Mather: A Bibliography*, pp. 114-15. The six men who now questioned their 1 August determination were Increase Mather, James Allen, Samuel Willard of Boston, Charles Morton of Charlestown, Michael Wigglesworth of Malden, Nehemiah Walter of Roxbury. Jonathan Pierpoint of Reading did not attend the October meeting, nor did he add his signature to the epistle, as did another seven ministers at some point after the meeting. Nathaniel Gookin had died in mid-August. Jabez Fox of Woburn was present in October but not in August.

⁸⁷Miller, *New England Mind*, p. 199.

⁸⁸*Some Miscellany Observations on Our Present debates respecting Witchcrafts in a Dialogue* (Philadelphia: William Bradford [?], 1692); for bibliographical information, see Moore, "Notes on the Bibliography of Witchcraft in Massachusetts," American Antiquarian Society, *Proceedings*, n.s., 5 (April 1888): 248-50.

⁸⁹*Miscellany Observations*, pp. 1, 2.

re-write the history of Salem and to assert the caution, diffidence even, of the ministerial elite, himself in particular, in relation to that crisis.

So why did he and his colleagues not rejoice in the success of their manipulations in the summer of 1692? Why did they back away from the consequences they had so actively willed? As with others who had sought to deploy the didactic and evangelical possibilities of cases of diabolic assault like Peter Canisius in Augsburg or John Darrell in Nottingham, the New Englanders had discovered that the consequences of their actions were two-fold, both regrettable: first, to empower children and adolescents; second, to divide communities.⁹⁰

In mid-July 1692, the role of afflicted children from Salem as expert witch-hunters was affirmed at Andover—"a very grosse evill, a real abomination, not fit to be known in N[ew] E[ngland]" in Brattle's opinion. Thus encouraged, the accusations of the afflicted, reinforced by the testimony, often "flat lyes or contradictions," of those who sought safety in complicity and confession, increased in number and spiralled upward.⁹¹ As Emerson Baker has shown "many ministers, politicians, militia officers and members of their families were cried out on for witchcraft." Dudley Bradstreet, an Andover magistrate, who had sought to impose some judicial propriety and restraint in the process of arrest and interrogation, stood accused. So was the wife of the Beverley minister, John Hale, who had been a supporter of the accusations, as well as the wife of Governor Phips.⁹²

The trials, not least as the afflicted went into overdrive and challenged the social order, increasingly split the Bay Colony and divided its elite. One of the nominated judges, Nathaniel Saltonstall, retired from the court "dissatisfyed with the proceedings of it." Another, Jonathan Corwin, had received, three days after the conviction of Burroughs, a letter powerfully questioning the court's reliance on spectral evidence from an old friend and colleague, the counselor, Robert Pike. Other magistrates were threatening to resign their commissions, refusing to "be active in disturbing the liberty of their

⁹⁰For Darrell, see Marion Gibson, *Possession, Puritanism and Print: Darrell, Harsnett, Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Exorcism Controversy* (London: Chatto and Pickering, 2006), particularly pp. 90–100; for Canisius, Lyndal Roper, "Exorcism and the theology of the body" in her *Oedipus and the Devil: witchcraft, sexuality and religion in early modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 173, 174–80.

⁹¹Brattle, "Letter," in *Narratives*, ed. Burr, pp. 173, 179.

⁹²Baker, *Storm of witchcraft*, pp. 140, 142.

Majesties' subjects, merely on the accusation of these afflicted, possessed children.”⁹³

By October many New Englanders were opposing procedures that “will utterly ruine and undoe poor N[ew] E[ngland].”⁹⁴ And at this time many ministers who had expressed some enthusiasm for the prosecutions, certainly the Mathers, father and son, retreated, if at different speeds, and sought to distance themselves from the denouement which they had wrought.

George Burroughs, we may think, was a soft target. His failure to baptise his children or to take communion suggested heterodox belief; his ‘lucky’ escapes from Wabanaki raids were suspicious; rumour swirled around the deaths of his first two wives. But he was a minister. And the Mathers, New England’s own “witchcraftical doctors,” initially subscribed to his prosecution, conviction, and execution even in the face of their own doubts about the probative issues in cases of witchcraft. They did so in order to make a powerful contribution in the debate with those who challenged orthodox witchcraft belief. In doing so, and in hounding Burroughs to destruction, they divided their own society and empowered children. Ultimately they, and Cotton Mather in particular, sought to refashion themselves, posing as cool and detached observers of the maelstrom that Salem became. Yet it was he and they who had initially welcomed and developed the opportunity, particularly in the 1 August Cambridge Opinion, to challenge the Sadducees by producing a figure so very unlike the usual suspects.

⁹³Brattle, “Letter,” in *Narratives*, ed. Burr, pp. 180, 184; the letter to Corwin was transcribed and attributed to Robert Pike by Charles Upham, *Salem Witchcraft*, pp. 617–19, 697–705. Mary Beth Norton provides an excellent analysis in *Devil’s Snare*, pp. 266–68.

⁹⁴Brattle, “Letter,” in *Narratives*, ed. Burr, p. 184.

Clive Holmes taught at Cornell from 1969–88, then at Oxford until his retirement in 2013. He has published widely on the British Civil Wars, on local government and on social structure in early modern England, on fen drainage and agrarian riot, and on witchcraft. His interest in the latter theme was inspired by Cornell’s great collection of materials concerning the history of witchcraft, a superb teaching resource.